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« Imagine Lanark *meets* Something Leather*, with a kind of Poor Things feel to it » : politiques de réécriture, réécriture politique dans* Old Men in Love *d’Alasdair Gray*

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"Imagine *Lanark* meets *Something Leather*, with a kind of *Poor Things* feel to it": The politics of rewriting in Alasdair Gray's *Old Men in Love*

Old Men in Love, Gray's eighth novel and his twenty-second book, is a project that places rewriting and intertextuality at its core, with a pact of reading based on the idea of the found manuscript which is a replica of that of *Poor Things* (1992), albeit refined and exploited to its reasonable limits and maybe beyond. The intertextual drive includes writing into *Old Men in Love* a male character, John Tunnock, reminiscent of Duncan Thaw,[1] allowing the return of annotator and critic Sidney Workman from *Lanark*, imitating the layout and general tonality of the marginal notes of *The Book of Prefaces*, as well as turning older John Tunnock into a version of Jock McLeish from *1982, Janine*.[2] Gray also unsurprisingly gives himself a few cameo parts mostly as the editor of Tunnock's papers. This very comprehensive self-pastiche has led the writer and critic Will Self to stress the carnivalised nature of the narrative, when he invites the reader to "[i]magine [that] *Lanark* meets *Something Leather*, with a kind of *Poor Things* feel to it". But this "pitch" [*sic*], if considered from the point of view of the one recurrent character in this narrative of aborted tales, John Tunnock, becomes quite a different one, as the latter obsessively refers to his great project of writing a history of humanity that would change our vision of the world, past, present and future. Because of the author's choice to present rewrites of famous or less well known texts (Plato's *The Clouds* and Aubrey Menen's *The Abode of Love*), because the rewrites adopt a historical, sometimes political, sometimes anthropological angle while allowing the rewritten characters (famous or not)

1. Young Tunnock's schooldays, his passion for Roberta Piper, his love of American comics and the overall Bildungsroman structure of chapter 16 are meant to be seen as a rewrite of Duncan Thaw's early years.

2. The kinky passages, pornographic allusions and even the peculiar use of typography, as well as the emphasis on the sexually arousing aspect of women's clothes bring to mind the central features of this novel as well as—more diffusely—*Something Leather*.

an—often demotic—voice of their own, the historical narrative thus presented is at once quite remote and very contemporary. The goal remains, as the title of another of Gray's novels points out, to follow the path of one or several "history maker(s)", but the basic, enduring and maybe unsolved question—what history?—promptly emerges. And indeed, *Old Men in Love* both displaces and centralises the question of history by reflecting on its primary medium—language. The questions raised by the novel therefore become "What sort of discourse(s) account(s) for the past?", "For what audience?", "With what aim?", concentrating on the politics of rewriting in both senses of the word "politics".

An organic piece

The novel entitled *Old Men in Love*[3] boasts thirteen different narratives (sixteen if one takes into account the various postscripts in the shape of John Tunnock's obituary, his testament, and Sidney Workman's epilogue) whose relative statuses, as in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*, become increasingly difficult to establish.[4] As is usual with Gray, the illustrations are used to further destabilise the ontological horizon, as some of the narratives are granted a title page, complete with illustrations and the Grayian symbol of the open book, while others have to uncomfortably share the space of the page. What remains is the multiplicity of narrators, who between them form a motley collection of "old men" in the sense that they are brought into the book from a variety of remote historical eras,[5] and the related issue of narrative control. When for example John Tunnock, describing his masterpiece at the beginning of chapter 7, declares that he "need[s] a chapter describing the performance of [Plato's] *The Clouds*" but that he can't write it because he "cannot get the jokes" (p. 46), Gray the editor, a super-narrator of sorts, will do that for him, not by describing the play, but by adding *The Trial of Socrates*, his own contemporary and anachronistic rewrite of *The Clouds*, to the novel. This choice indicates that his relationship with Tunnock is a power-relation, whereby the former can organise, or supply texts missing from the latter's narrative.

In this constantly antagonistic relationship, voices are sometimes shown to go berserk, as in chapter 29, an instalment of Tunnock's diary

3. A. Gray, *Old Men in Love*, London, Bloomsbury, 2007. All references will be to this edition.

4. In fact, even if the book cannot technically be defined as a forking paths narrative because of the regular recurrence of Tunnock's narrative, it certainly emulates that method of novelistic construction.

5. Namely the Athenian Republic of Pericles, Medician Florence or Victorian England.

which abruptly mixes the typographical convention hitherto used by the diary (italics) with those reserved for the autobiographical chapters (normal types). This method, which foregrounds disruption—the penetration of one ontology by another—in fact emulates with its simultaneity effect the process of writing, with one type of voice (that of the narrator writing about his real life) being constantly interrupted by the voice of his own fictionalised self, as the novel he is writing unfolds before him and, in real time, before the reader's eyes. The consequence of the overkill—in this case the rapid succession of discourses—is not an emphasis on the fragility of ontologies and of the written world, but rather, because of the systematic use of the alternation throughout the chapter, in effect a refusal to conform to the forking paths model, a highlighting of the continuity, or indeed contiguity between the world of writing and that of the writer in real life, in other words, on the context and method of, the decisions made about, in short the politics of writing in the usual sense of the term. This contiguity additionally allows for the "political", or "public" dimension of Gray's writing to be restored to a prominence that the games and tricks of the postmodern conjuror-figure had apparently sidelined since the famous epilogue section of *Lanark*. The unnamed female lawyer in John Tunnock's diary, together with Angus Calder, impersonates Gray's mouthpiece for his more corrosive portraits of contemporary society, when she rants for example on the policy of New Labour, accused of "reject[ing] the unions and court[ing] the rich" before sarcastically concluding, "where else can poor Blair get all the money he needs?" (p. 256), or when she reflects about refugees and the actual worsening of their already precarious status that came with the neologism "asylum seekers" (p. 257). She also relentlessly urges Tunnock to cross the public/private boundary in his writing, egging him on with questions such as "And your public life? Have you abandoned writing about modern Scotland?" (p. 256). The lawyer in that instance as in all her other appearances assists Tunnock—and Gray—in drawing the novel's discourse towards the contemporary, in making the novel, to use Tunnock's own words, "factual—not entirely factual […]—but factual enough" (p. 59). With the help of Alasdair Gray the editor, appearing in the guise of marginal notes to back the lawyer up with his sheer "physical" presence, the diarist comes to emphasise "facts", i.e. the political agenda, which is the only one to remain standing in the ruins of the various ontologies pitted against one another—in the case of chapter 29, the combat between ontologies presenting the fictional diarist, the fictional author of fiction, the fictional editor who happens to be (fictionalised) Alasdair Gray.

Throughout the narrative therefore, Gray promotes the political use of a carnivalised world, by using juxtapositions (of voices, texts, historical

periods), defamiliarisation (with marginal notes on the meaning of words like "coal scuttle") and the interplay of arbitrary connections (such as that forcibly established between writing and the Labour Party). Collisions and anachronisms force the reader to examine the contiguity pattern, as for example when Tunnock yokes together two situations not even randomly connected:

> Prince [the guru of the Victorian religious community described in "Belovèd"] will be the least creative of my heroes being nearest today, when local and national governments openly promote private company profits instead of public welfare. (p. 60)

Some yet stranger encounters, metaleptic ones, also take place in *Old Men in Love*, as characters travel from one fictional universe to the next. The character called Zoe first enters the narrative in chapter 9, when an old drunk who claims to be her father violently threatens a puzzled Tunnock who has not heard of her yet. The reader, together with Tunnock, will eventually discover a Zoe in the Prince narrative,[6] before she re-enters Tunnock's metaleptic level clad in combat trousers, ready for an action which is never clearly described. This disruptive episode recalls Lanark's interview with his author in the epilogue section of the novel when the latter makes the now famous revelation:

> [Y]ou have had to reach this room by passing through several chapters I haven't clearly imagined yet, so you know details of the story which I don't.[7]

The Zoe episode is in fact a practical re-enactement of that postulate; it points to the circularity and contiguity of the story and forestalls the inevitable criticism present in reviews, that *Old Men in Love* is made up of disparate pieces. It emphasises instead the notion of an underlying structure unifying the book, even if the structure is a non-linear one, a sort of super-structure of rewriting. In a manner perhaps designed to offset the critics clutching at the (not so thin) straw of the postmodern deconstruction of fiction and reality by the novel, Gray, in chapter 9, gives the key to the organic structure of *Old Men in Love*:

> Between sleep and waking this morning imagined my naked body spread out flat like a landscape beneath me with many wee black circular openings like rabbit holes. I descended and entered one in my chest, then found myself talking to Lorenzo de Medici about the love that led God to make the uni-

6. See page 156, "[Prince] enjoyed his Zoe for Ever and Ever Amen!"
7. A. Gray, *Lanark, A Life in Four Books*, London, Picador, [1981], 1991, p. 483.

> verse. That dream is a reminder that when writers cannot write something, they should write something else. (p. 61)

This image of the human body turned landscape serves as a metaphor for creation informing all of Gray's fictions: the narrator(s) appears as a field laden with (his)stories. In addition, the image connects with another use Gray makes of geography in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland?*, where the author refers to Scotland as "Firths, lochs, chains of high moorlands and mountains", prompting Gavin Miller to comment on Gray's "anti-essentialist vision of Scotland as a mosaic of communities".[8] Out of the mosaic of communities and histories springs the various strands of the story. The metaphor of creation, together with the reminder that history is not so far removed from story, as indicated by Tunnock's wish to study "the historical vision of Goethe's *Faust*, Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Hardy's *Dynasts*" (p. 152), binds together story-writing and historical recording, insisting on the organicity of the portrayal. That this organicity should be the result of a process, here the process of creation, rather than being immediately accessible, is indicated by the warped image that is evoked by the quotation, that of a body that mutates into a landscape. This notion also dates back from the early period of Gray's creation, in *Lanark*, where the authorial illustrations already point to the organic-natural type of integration that goes on, using the symbolic power of iconic representation: the frontispiece to book 2 shows a body being taken apart in a dissecting theatre, while the cover illustration presents a landscape, itself a stylised version of Glasgow. Taken together, those two illustrations seem to pave the way for Tunnock's reiterated assertion of the organicity of creation. Landscapes, or cityscapes also adorn *Old Men in Love*, and the high angle which is used in all three maps point to the author's renewed, or indeed maybe simply reasserted, faith in his capacity to "map the world"—one remembers that both *Lanark* and *The Book of Prefaces* end on this metaphor of the map—to critically and creatively examine history, whether ancient or contemporary.

The re-assessment of postmodernism

Tunnock's diary, with all its mysterious female characters who enter and exit it in a seemingly inexplicable and certainly unexplained manner, is consistent with the metaphor of the body of fiction. Because of their

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8. G. Miller, *Alasdair Gray, The Fiction of Communion*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2005, p. 130. The sentence from *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* is quoted by Gavin Miller on the same page.

mystery, the girls (Isabel, Yvonne, Niki, and even Zoe) can be seen as potential fictions which are not really actualised, conversations which take place in an unexplored hole in the narrator's body, ready to come to the surface when the latter visits their area. The vagueness of their stories, which only reach the narrator in a very imperfect, fragmentary way,[9] marks them out clearly as fictional potentialities, all the more so as their entrance coincides with the suggestion of a variety of literary genres. Tunnock for instance reflects that he might have enjoyed his relationship with one of them "had [he] been a character in a Victorian sentimental novel" (p. 92), and a few lines further down he depicts himself either as a melodrama villain:

> I stamped around the room clawing the air with hooked fingers, howling like a wolf, growling like a tiger, spitting at Niki the filthiest names I knew—"inconsiderate mother! Untruthful parasite! Selfish manipulator!" (p. 93)

Or as a hero in an American noir novel:

> "Clean that up, bitch, and you'll hear!"—using an American accent which somehow seemed appropriate. (p. 93)

The reader is led to imagine the possibilities of fiction, what the novel might have developed into, had the narrator chosen to go down the path of melodrama, sentimental or crime fiction. The comic dimension of such suggestions does not go unnoticed, especially as the different genres are all sketched within the same page. The result is an impression of the ruthless invasion of a quiet world of fiction by story and, more importantly, because of the novel's pact of reading, by history, to match the girls' invasion of Tunnock's uneventful life. So that the mode of contiguity is to be construed as managing to incorporate upheavals and disruptions, again a statement of power over, of mastery of postmodern technique.

This capacity to use the techniques or *topoi* which make up Gray's writing with a separate, personal agenda, is made obvious in chapter 17, which opens on a word for word repetition of the beginning of a former chapter. In a sort of saturation effect, of overkill, the very flaunting of postmodernist techniques points to Gray's use of this passage as a lure, an indication for the reader that he is to look behind the very obvious and ultimately very self-contained effect of the literary trick. When the narrator departs from the already written, he does so to issue a warning directed at academics and critics:

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9. For instance, a rather flustered and not very articulate Niki speaks of "suicide with or without success" (p. 90).

> The eye-opening effort is endless. In every age it must be tackled anew, but obviously it could not be tackled within the walls of a university. (p. 138)

What is at stake in this scathing remark is what the narrator sees as the static position of contemporary criticism, its entrenchment in theories of literature first aired in the 1980s and early 1990s in the works Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon or Brain McHale, which commented on the self-reflexive, disruptive and iconoclastic features observed in the literature that was being published at the time. And yet Hutcheon in particular pointed out the fundamental duality that was present in many novels of the period:

> The novel has been inherently ambivalent since its inception: it has always been both fictional and worldly. […] Postmodern historiographic metafiction merely foregrounds this inherent paradox by having its historical and socio-political grounding sit uneasily alongside its reflexivity.[10]

Old Men in Love is precisely situated at a crossroads of the formal, theoretical and the historical aspects. It shows a fictional world where the uneasy cohabitation has been solved, where the self-reflexive strategy has come full circle or, to borrow one of Gray's own titles, to the end of its tethers, in order to let the novel concentrate on what was there from the very beginning, in *Lanark*, *1982*, *Janine* or in the short stories: the historical and ideological dimension of his writing. This is precisely the meaning of the critic fuel section, the epilogue written by Sidney Workman in *Old Men in Love*. By providing the reader with a "historical"—in the sense of diachronic—presentation of Workman's involvement with Alasdair Gray's fiction from the first, Gray deliberately reconciles aspects of his fiction which had very often been considered separately.[11] In an epilogue that is made to appear like a testament (Tunnock's obituary and testament are placed just before the epilogue, and Alasdair Gray himself is described as old and in bad health), the author effectively suggests integration and a recentering which extends to the posterity of his *œuvre*. Consequently, the epilogue to *Old Men in Love* claims both text and history, a historicization hidden behind the Grayian motif of the debunking of the author. This reclaiming is the reason for the inclusion of all his former works into this last novel to date and for such an obtrusive presence of real-life

10. L. Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 56.

11. Many critics have recently noted the arbitrariness of such a vision of Gray's works, among whom Gavin Miller. In his recent book, *Alasdair Gray, The Fiction of Communion*, the critic insists in a somewhat provocative manner on Gray's novels not being postmodernist, emphasising instead the humanism and historicism of the writer's conception of the world and of his use of fiction in order to promote that vision.

Gray, who, behind the textual games and insecurities of postmodernism appears "in person" to silence critics and undermine their insistence on an ahistorical and de-referentialised view of literature. This censure can be linked to Gray's poem "Postmodernism" which appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1997, and was then published in the collection *Sixteen Occasional Poems*:

> In the beginning the Word was with God,
> and the Word was God.
> All things were made by him.
> In him was life, and the life was the light of men
> and the light shone in darkness;
> and the darkness partly understood,
> and lectured on it.
>
> Light died before the uncreating word.
>
> Now darkness lectures to darkness on darkness
> and the darkness sees it is good.[12]

This poem, which is a verbatim quotation of St John, followed by a quote from Alexander Pope's *the Dunciad* is actually commented on by the author himself on his website, where he severely condemns "fashionable criticism" for being "divorced from common sense", and for ignoring "descriptions of our intricate universe and how well or badly we live in it".[13] In a conclusion which suggests the project behind *Old Men in Love*, Gray regrets that "ideas Homer, Jesus, Shakespeare, Mark Twain et cetera thought important seemed irrelevant to the Postmodern speech game".[14] And yet, he uses the very methods, tricks and techniques which caused him to be labelled a postmodernist writer in the first place, in a defiant gesture that asserts his own freedom of creation and in a work that claims no hierarchy between those techniques and the fundamental role of literature which he formulates in *The Book of Prefaces*, in a prefatory chapter entitled "On what led to English Literature":

> [History is a summary of replies to] questions no human brain can avoid or finally answer […]. Who am I? How did I come here? What should I do? Where am I going?[15]

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12. A. Gray, © 2005, <http://www.alasdairgray.co.uk/poetry/occasional/6postmodernisn.htm> [consulted 30/9/08].
13. Id., <http://www.alasdairgray.co.uk/poetry/occasional/postscript.htm> [consulted 30/09/08].
14. Id., <http://www.alasdairgray.co.uk/poetry/occasional/postscript.htm> [consulted 30/09/08].
15. A. Gray, *The Book of Prefaces*, London and New York, Bloosmbury, 2000, p. 21.

To use Tunnock's fewer, but as opinionated words, Gray's "field is historical sociology" (p. 152), an invitation for us to read his accounts of Medician Florence, Periclean Athens, Victorian England, or 1950s Scotland again, and restore the human to its rightful place, in other words to revert to the back-to-basics world of the sausage seller in the Athens chapter, rather than that of the "sausager", "sausagist", "sausologistical expert" (p. 34).

History and the narrative of postponement

Robert Kiely, writing in 1997 about the contemporary rewriting of works of fiction of the past, describes a peculiar relationship between hypertext and hypotext:

> The fictions of the past are seen not as monuments to be revered or condemned, but as dehistoricized discourse to be borrowed or ignored, read and misread within the imagined field of a common contemporaneity.[16]

Gray's *Old Men in Love*, which can be said to be written backwards, with a reassessment of great works of literature, less famous ones, as well as his own fiction, starts on the contrary from a re-historicized vision of these "fictions of the past", granting his mouthpiece, John Tunnock, the privilege of formulating what exactly this perspective corresponds to, in a realization that links him with Duncan Thaw, and the famous "imagining a city" monologue:

I am haunted, oppressed by feeling I should write about the life I know, but what do I know about life? What has life taught me about Glasgow? How can an old man with very little experience put the world where he lives into a good story? (p. 89)With the help of *the Book of Prefaces* which supplies *Old Men in Love* with a programme by labelling Socrates's Athens "the world's greatest democracy" and ancient Rome "the world's greatest empire",[17] and that of all the great writers of the past (from Balzac and Wilde to Stevenson and Stoker) who concur, according to Tunnock's preface to his historical trilogy, to focus on "something in humanity [which] refuses to lie down under disasters and injustices", contributing to "mak[ing] a just world for everyone" (p. 57), the narrator's project in Gray's latest novel is to propose a wide-ranging and far-reaching image of the re-historicized world, by concentrating on the issues of justice and democracy. This idea is summarised by Robert Crawford's review of *Old*

16. R. Kiely, *Reverse Tradition*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 34.
17. A. Gray, Alasdair, *The Book of Prefaces*, p. 27.

Men in Love, in which the critic states that "a preoccupation with the true meaning of democratic accountability is one of the several themes uniting these linked stories",[18] and comes after the establishment of a Scottish parliament brought about by the devolution of Scotland.[19] In that context, the contemporary event used as a starting point for the modern narrative, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, can be seen as highly symbolical in spite of Gray's own denial of any particular significance for this choice: it emphasises the relevance of a renewed questioning of the concept of democracy, at a times when geo-political strategies are seen to have been bankrupted. Contrary to Gray, Tunnock's friend who bears the fitting nickname of Mastermind firmly places the reflection conducted in the book within a context of revision of the political and democratic frontiers of the world:

> The Twin Towers have been the main financial house of an Empire State whose bankers and brokers […] think themselves masters of the universe although they do nothing but enrich themselves by manipulating international money markets. They do not care what this does to other nations, but they control them, and such capitalists *should not* be perfectly safe. (pp. 9-10)

One of the assertions which are obliquely made in this diatribe has to do precisely with Tunnock's choice of depicting "the world's greatest democracy" together with "the world's greatest empire" with a view to showing how fragile those apparently historically stable categories can become under the duress of contemporary events. The core question therefore has to do with political and economic isolationism in a global context, and the dire consequences these lead to. As is usual with Gray, the peritext of his works encrypts this rationale: while the early books' covers convey a printed message solely oriented towards Scotland, with his now famous motto "Work as if You Were in the Early Days of a Better Nation",[20] a later one, *The Book of Prefaces*, adds to the message a variety of flags, with one an impression of the American one. Finally, *Old Men in Love*'s cover, with its message that the title's old men "are still learning" does away with the obviously political message, replacing it with the warning that we should expand our vision, not by severing the link with history, but by "learning" from the narratives of the past, or by

18. R. Crawford, "Old Men in Love, by Alasdair Gray: Lessons in life and love from Glasgow's Dickens", *The Independent*, *Friday, 9 November 2007*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/old-men-in-love-by-alasdair-gray-399562.html> [consulted October 2008].

19. *Old Men in Love* was published in 2007, the year of the opening of Scotland's devolved Parliament.

20. Note that this phrase is itself intertextual, as Gray acknowledged that he had borrowed (and adapted) these lines from Canadian poet Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1968).

using them rather than isolating them as mere artefacts. The structuring of the novel around Socrates (who opens and closes the book) induces the reader to draw from the philosopher's emphasis on spiritual progress (another possible meaning of the cryptic line on the cover), leading us to see rewriting in this case as a re-centering of Gray's vision described by Gavin Miller as a humanist project and which the critic sees as stretching as far back as *Lanark*:

> Gray is essentially a humanist in his attitude to time and history. Even where his fiction is self-conscious ("metafictional"), it is in the service of a modern commitment to (a contingent) historical progress. […] This agenda in Gray's writing makes it quite unfashionable in contemporary literary criticism, where metafiction is often regarded as the postmodern exposure of a supposed essential similarity between myth and history.[21]

In *Old Men in Love*, the recentering of Gray's fiction on the notion of historical and spiritual progress, which dates back to Gray's image of a Scottish Co-operative Socialist Republic in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland?*, and which is meant to be read as reaching back to all of Gray's previous books, is by no means a utopian, or in spite of the novel title, senile vision. It is a vision to keep working on in order to prevent it from being dismissed as *passé*, a danger introduced into the very pages of *Old Men in Love* where Mastermind precisely censures Calder for being "in pursuit of an old-fashioned Scotland running on Owenite New Lanark lines, in fact a Scottish Socialist Co-operative Wholesale Republic" (p. 259). It is also a vision that should include its own criticism, as is indicated by the structure, which places *The Trial of Socrates*—a piece which emphasises the excesses, the erring of democracy[22]—at the end. Similarly, the longest narrative, "Belovèd", which is about the real-life leader of a nineteenth-century religious community, with its agapemone (house of love) dedicated to love and spiritual communion between brethren turning into a republic of profit, of economic and sexual exploitation, intertextually refers to such short stories as the Axletree Stories or "Five Letters from an Eastern Empire".[23] Those episodes confirm the principle of circularity, while tying it not (not only) to the process of writing but (also) to history, depicted as moving in a circular way, in the manner of the intercalendrical Zone in *Lanark*, or of the hopeless circularity of Jock's thoughts in

21. G. Miller, *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion*, p. 112.

22. It does that in particular by granting Critias and Anytus prominent roles in the play which (as the critic rightly notes in the epilogue) they historically could not have had.

23. Both stories were published in *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 1983.

1982, Janine. The historian has several mouthpieces[24] and a nickname, the Gadfly, which proudly figures on the title page of one of the parts of the "great historical trilogy". As is indicated by the cheeky intention behind the choice of this nickname, the polyglossic historian engages the reader in a delaying game, in which the historical masterpiece that will endure in posterity is constantly being postponed by comments along the lines of "this book will explain otherwise" (p. 147) or "my masterpiece should draw readers into […]" (p. 152), to the extent that when the title of the above-mentioned masterpiece—*Who Paid for All This?*—eventually appears on page 262, the reader is indeed probably encouraged to take it as applying to the book he has almost finished reading.[25] In fact, the very ambition to write such a volume will probably strike him as very optimistic, coming as it does from an author who is already dead, as the novel's subtitle—"John Tunnock's posthumous papers"—indicates. The result is that the great historical masterpiece, the ultimate history of the world from the Big Bang to Gordon Brown, is a book that is not to be, a book that is forever postponed. Paradoxically, it is forever delayed, because it has already partly been written, within the pages of *A History Maker*, *Poor Things*, *Lanark*, *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*, but also of Gogol's, Pushkin's, Balzac's works, or of Angus Calder's books to cite but a few.

Old men are still learning

In the final analysis, *Old Men in Love is* fragmented, or episodic, or even hectic in its construction. But as the organic metaphor suggests, it can be seen as part of the Grayian landscape, where narrators, characters, implied authors fill in the gaps left by the other books, or, to use the other metaphor of the textual body, conduct a dialogue with the various "characters" hidden away in the various holes of the story, and of history. The gap-filling takes many distinct shapes, the most shocking of those remaining the prophetic, or even short-circuiting "updates" suggested in the novel, as for instance when, in a book published in the wake of many post 9/11 apocalyptic diatribes, a Victorian college principal

24. Angus Calder, the anonymous lawyer, Mastermind, the editor called Alasdair Gray with the irritating habit of scribbling his comments in the margins of the book, John Tunnock, himself a figure which compresses Jock, Duncan Thaw and Alasdair Gray, and on occasions Socrates, Pericles, Brother Philippo.

25. For Gray's own explanation of the significance of this title, see *Alasdair Gray : La Littérature ou le Refus de l'Amnésie / Literature Against Amnesia*, Avignon, Éditions universitaires d'Avignon, collection "Entre-Vues", 2010, p. 55.

greets his new pupils with the sentence "A dangerous age, gentlemen! Mad messiahs are springing up like mushrooms" (p. 163), or when a lisping Alcibiades, volunteering a reason for men to go to war, irresistibly brings to mind 21st century American president George W. Bush when he explains, "we say we're wewisting a wicked thweat" (p. 42). But in spite of the obvious wish to amuse, the text of *Old Men in Love* consistently pursues the aim which is in fact defined by Tunnock in the preface to his great historical trilogy, that of bringing Gray's political agenda up to date, as well as underlining its evolution and providing a view of history as a vivid, sensitive organism. The result is that behind the postmodern paraphernalia, or maybe with the help of such *topoi* traditionally classified as postmodern, Gray manages in his latest novel to synthesise and dynamise his views both of the variability and of the prominence of history. Coming full circle in his latest novel, he introduces us to a universe at once fictional and real where, true to his commitment to the essential elasticity of time, history logically turns into prophecy:

> The flaw in most histories is authors who pretend to be unprejudiced reporters of fact but keep describing the world coming to a good end in their own comfortable state—only Carlyle saw that nations whose only guiding principle was economic competition were preparing a Dark Age blacker than earlier ones. (p. 139)

In a manner that seems to suggest an awareness of the urgency of the situation, Gray manages to close the loop of narrative on the humanist project that has never been absent from his writing, or indeed any writing, as he forcibly reminds his readers by the constant use of intertextual contiguity. When read against contemporary events, his warning eloquently asserts that, like Gray's old men, his readers are still, or should still be learning.